

Promoting higher education in a time of restraint

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Decision makers in Europe, as in Canada, have come to recognize that education and lifelong learning opportunities for their citizens are essential to the development of a competitive society and economy.

Several internal EU strategies underline that knowledge and the innovation it triggers are the EU's most valuable assets, particularly in light of increasing global competition.

While each EU member state is responsible for its own education and training system, lifelong learning policies and programs at the union level, under the responsibility of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture, are designed to support national actions and help address common challenges, such as aging societies, skills deficits among the workforce, and global competition.

In September 2011, as part of Europe's 2020 strategy for growth and jobs, the European Commission presented a reform strategy to boost graduate numbers, improve teaching

quality, and maximize what higher education can do to help the EU economy emerge stronger from the current financial crisis.

As there is a strong emphasis on mobility and co-operation beyond the borders of the EU, the EU will propose in early 2013 a separate strategy on internationalization, with a focus on support for the EU higher-education sector in creating more knowledge and innovation by engaging internationally.

The Erasmus Mundus co-operation and mobility program in the field of higher education is one of the most important instruments for supporting EU higher education and co-operation with non-EU countries and attracts the participation of Canadian students and academic institutions.

EU-Canada co-operation

Education is an important area of co-operation between Canada and the EU as evidenced by the more than 2,300 active bilateral agreements in effect.

In 1995, the European Commission made a first formal agreement with Canada on co-operation in higher-education and vocational training.

It aims to promote understanding between the people of the European Union and Canada and to improve the quality of their human resource development. The current third generation of the agreement is meant to last until 2013.

The successive renewed agreements have led to European and Canadian funding for projects on international curriculum development and student exchange activities with jointly designed courses, including vocational education and training and language learning.

Through the framework of this agreement, the EU has set up joint study programs with Canada that give financial support for student mobility, leading to a better quality of higher-education and vocational training for both partners, and the promotion of greater intercultural understanding. There are initiatives such as joint or double degrees, joint mobility actions, and dialogues on youth policy issues. Universities and community colleges can access these programs by responding to calls for proposal, which provide funding for consortia that organize transatlantic exchange or degree partnerships.

The agreement also complements the activities of the network of EU Centres of Excellence in Canadian universities as well as of the European Network for Canadian Studies centres and associations in that it offers additional possibilities for exchanges and encourages structural co-operation between institutions and organizations on both sides of the Atlantic.

To date, 107 transatlantic consortia have been funded, involving 765 EU and Canadian higher-education and training institutions with more than 5,600 students who have participated in transatlantic exchanges.

Thirty-seven joint consortia projects involving EU and Canadian higher-education and training institutions are currently underway as part of the EU-Canada Transatlantic Exchange and Degree Partnership program. These projects include a diverse range of academic disciplines, such as engineering, chemistry, agriculture, forestry, co-op and vocational education. They involve the mobility of students and staff, including arrangements

for credit recognition and transfer among participating institutions. As a result, more than 2,800 Canadians and Europeans will have had the opportunity to study and teach on the other side of the Atlantic.

Independent evaluators have suggested that the agreement will continue to be relevant for both partners.

Recently, however, it was announced that all current and future calls for proposals between now and 2013 have been cancelled due to government-wide austerity measures in Canada. While this is regrettable and will hamper co-operation activities in higher education and training at this time, Canada remains a natural partner for the EU.

In its Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-20, the European Commission decided to establish a single education program with a very strong international dimension. This new single program should make provisions to ensure the continuation of the successful EU-Canada co-operation in education, training and youth in the future.

With ambitions for an enhanced economic and trade relationship, the matters of student and labour mobility as well as the recognition of competences and credentials are of significant importance to both sides.

The groundwork is being laid by the provisions of our co-operation in higher education, training and youth. In the future, and in an increasingly demanding global economy, continued dialogue on the mutual benefits of this co-operation should be highlighted.

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